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Back to back housing, courts, and privies: the slums of 19th century England

The industrial revolution in England had by the beginning of the 19th century led to what we would now call rapid urbanisation. Push factors from the rural areas (poverty, disease, changes in agriculture, displacement of peasant farmers) and pull factors from the cities (industrialisation and the growth of Empire) led to huge urban growth in places like Liverpool, Manchester, York, and Birmingham. The result of all these processes in places like Liverpool was the growth of slums and parishes of enormous density.

Housing like these back to backs and courts in Liverpool were typical when in the 1830s Liverpool's first medical officer of health, William Henry Duncan carried out a survey of sanitary conditions while still working as a local general practitioner. He found that a third of the population lived in the cellars of these houses, which had earth floors and no ventilation or sanitation, and as many as 16 people to a room. These conditions predisposed to the spread of epidemic disease, and in particular the cholera that struck England in the mid-19th century with devastating consequences.

Today in Liverpool all but a handful of back to back houses have gone—demolished in the slum clearance programmes of the 1960s and 1970s, to be replaced often by high rise flats that brought with them their own problems. Ironically, this set of nine pairs of back to backs has now been restored for elegant inner city living as part of Liverpool's urban renaissance.

The courts, with their communal privy and ash pit, are remembered in this facsimile exhibit in the Liverpool Museum of Liverpool Life, which tells the story of those times, of housing, of life, and of public health threats.

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Please visit the journal web site to view other photos featured in the facsimile exhibit in the Liverpool Museum of Liverpool Life (<http://www.jech.com/supplemental>).

